

EDITOR'S PAGE

Integrity—an Outmoded Concept?

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We've heard a lot in the news recently about "integrity," or the lack thereof. Although the word has been used most often in politics, it has surfaced in business, medicine, law and even in relation to the United States site for the Winter Olympics. I've pondered what this word really means. It is associated with images of "honesty," "a handshake is as good as my bond," "keeping promises," "honoring commitments and covenants." How does one measure integrity? In a sense, one could gauge a person's integrity best not by their public actions, but by their private actions. One of the most important private covenants that a person ever makes is the marriage covenant. Is that a test of real integrity? Is it possible to break covenants in one's private life and still have "integrity" in one's public life? Is integrity something that can be stored in separate compartments, so that breaking a promise in one compartment has no effect on other compartments? Apparently, many believe that this is true. A short-term candidate for Speaker of the House of Representatives admitted to extramarital affairs because a magazine was going to publish the details of this affair. He defended his actions, however, because he was never involved with one of his employees, and he never lied about it under oath. Is this latter argument for his "integrity" meaningful? Does breaking the most important private covenant you will ever make not compromise integrity?

Maybe the rules of integrity are different for public figures like politicians than they are for others, like physicians. For example, if I were involved with an intern, I would lose my job and maybe my license. Perhaps integrity is an outmoded concept. Some polls suggest that as many as half of all married individuals have had at one time or another, an extramarital affair. I discussed these concepts with European colleagues during a recent trip abroad. They reminded me that at a recent presidential funeral in Europe, both the wife and mistress were in public attendance. A summary of their thoughts would be that extramarital affairs are so common that they have become the norm. Maybe we should delete

the phrase "marital fidelity" from the dictionary because it is no longer relevant.

The concepts of honesty and integrity enter our lives every day in many different ways. April 15 is a great test of one's integrity. As one tax accountant told me, "If you've never been audited by the Internal Revenue Service and lost, you haven't been aggressive enough." Is filling out travel expense forms a test of integrity? Is appropriate billing for medical services a test of integrity? Is the collection of research data and publication of scientific results an exercise in integrity? Although infrequent, examples of duplicate publication, plagiarism and falsification of data still surface occasionally in manuscripts submitted to *JACC*. In fact, every thing we do, and every decision we make, has ethical overtones.

How then should we apply the previous thoughts to our daily lives? To me, the concepts of honesty and integrity are attributes that are as important to physicians as any other qualities of character we might achieve. They can not be compartmentalized for different facets of our life. The keeping of both private and public trusts are part of that integrity. Outmoded concept? Perhaps to many. Concept worth supporting? Absolutely. In the Council of Medical Specialty Societies, Consensus statement on the Ethics of Medicine (April 25, 1998), moral integrity is especially emphasized in the section on "the Physician-Physician Relationship." "Physicians have a responsibility to maintain moral integrity, intellectual honesty, and clinical competence." Let's hope that moral integrity can continue to be reflected in our own lives as a marker of the high standards of our profession.

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